DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 328 473 SO 021 041

AUTHOR Stanley, Julia
TITLE Doing Democracy: Case Study at Cato Park.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Democracy; *Educational Research; *Ethnography; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Interviews; *Research Methodology; Secondary Education; *Social Class; *Social Science Research; Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *England

ABSTRACT

This document describes the process of initiating an ethnographic research project at a non-elite school in England that asked the question: "Why do ordinary youngsters bother to go to school?" The study followed a selected group of students for 2 years of high school before they took the public examinations at age 16. The school was analyzed from the standpoint of an outsider using insider knowledge from trusted informants; in general, a "democratic" or collaborative approach was followed. Findings and interpretations, published in "Marks on the Memory" (Stanley, 1989), showed that what students got out of Cato Park school depended on where they fit into the school's class system and where they belonged on a spectrum of gender and ability. The main focus of the document is the process of participatory research, including the effort to make results meaningful to participants and insight acquired about the process from other researchers' work. (NL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED328473

DOING DEMOCRACY: CASE STUDY AT CATO PARK

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

JULIA STANLEY

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SO 021 041

Doing Democracy: Case Study at Cato Park

Knowing is often the spring for action, and access to knowledge is frequently used as a mechanism of control.

Rob Walker[1]

In 1984, I quit my job as a comprehensive school teacher in an area of chronic unemployment, and set out to research the answer to one simple question: Why do ordinary youngsters bother to school? I decided to go to join a class of fourteen year olds in an 'ordinary' high school, and follow them through until they took public examinations at sixteen, hoping to get to know some individual students well at a time when many began to question their education and its likely value in the outside world.

I wanted to find out what different youngsters thought about their education, and to collaborate with them in making sense of it all, but first of all it was important to find out whether a small-scale, interactive study of the kind I had in mind was worth doing. Had earlier school studies established any ground rules for democratic relationships with subjects, and did they have the ring of *truth* as my dictionary defined it - had they yielded results which were 'real, genuine, correct, proper; not spurious, counterfeit, hybrid or *merely apparent*'?[2]

Three case studies of high schools were particularly relevant, and in my judgement provided an authentic and fruitful analysis of public education. In each case, I had some 'insider knowledge' to compare with the findings of the researcher:

> Growing Up American, by Alan Peshkin was a school study which successfully related the character of one particular high school to life in the wider community around it. 'Middle America' shared some of the conservative characteristics of the Heart of England, and so did their respective schools.[3]

---

[1]Rob Walker, Breaking the Grip of Print in Curriculum Research, Journal of Curriculum Studies, 18, 1, 1986

[2]The Oxford Illustrated Dictionary, second edition, Oxford, 1975

[3]Alan Peshkin, Growing Up American, University of Chicago Press, 1978

Experiencing Comprehensive Education, by my colleague Robert Burgess, described a school in the town where I was working in 1984. His analysis of the school's organisation was full of insights into the complex bureacracy which had evolved in that locality.[4]

Teachers' Work, by R W Connell, was based on work in Australian schools, but described the job of teaching through the eyes of characters who were recognisable to anyone with experience of English schools.[5]

All these writers analysed schools from the standpoint of an outsider, using insider knowledge from trusted informants; they described how to build up a cumulative picture by comparing (or triangulating) information from several sources, and all of them experienced problems when they tried to reconcile grounded research data with existing sociological and educational theories. The researchers' credibility had ultimately depended on openness and honest dealing, both with the subjects inside schools, and subsequently with readers of the research, and as in good factual reporting, *truth* was intrinsic to the personal values of the researcher and his subjects. Case studies do not deal in objective factual knowledge which can be replicated by scientific experiment.

Good qualitative research depends on the intellectual and social integrity of researchers. Two things follow from this: firstly, the would-be ethnographer has much to learn from the experience of others, which is the stock-in-trade, or accumulated wisdom of the field, so it makes sense to read widely, before, during, and after doing fieldwork, and to pick the brains of established ethnographers. Secondly, the key to a good case study lies in plain dealing with subjects, and it pays to be as honest and open as possible with the host community from the outset, because without their wholehearted co-operation it is impossible to interpret what is going on.

---

[4]Robert G Burgess, Experiencing Comprehensive Education, Methuen, London, 1983
[5]R W Connell, Teachers' Work, Allen & Unwin, London, Sydney & Boston, 1985

While I was doing the fieldwork at Cato Park, I read as much academic literature as I could lay my hands on[6], and spent some time talking to Paul Willis, Lynn Davies, Bob Burgess, and Peter Woods[7], all of whom gave helpful tips about how to organise data, as well as sharing some of the problems they had encountered and the mistakes they made. It turned out that to be forewarned really was to be forearmed, so when I came to write up the Cato Park study I included a chapter on How Not To Do It, hoping that later researchers would benefit in their turn.[8]

Bob Burgess gave good advice about relationships with teachers, pointing out that there were times when staff had to be reminded that what they said and did was being noted, just as political journalists need to ask their sources if they want to be 'on or off the record'; but Cato Park teachers proved to be one step ahead of their researcher most of the time. They called each other up to compare notes, and on one occasion sneaked a look at the fieldwork diary when I left it behind in the common room for a few minutes. Nevertheless, the headteacher thought that most of his staff wanted to co-operate, mainly because we began by publishing my curriculum vitae and a letter of introduction making it clear that no-one was forced to do so. Morriston teachers had got used to an authoritarian regime, and were pleased and surprised to be treated as professional equals.

---

[6]Robert G Burgess, Issues in Educational Research: Qualitative Methods, Falmer, Lewes, 1985
Robert G Burgess, Field Methods in the Study of Education, Falmer Lewes, 1985
Ivor F Goodson & Stephen J Ball (eds), Definging the Curriculum: Histories and Ethnographies, Falmer, Lewes, 1984
Thomas S Popkewitz & B Rober Tabachnick (eds), The Study of Schooling, Praeger, New York, 1981
J W Walker, Romanticising Resistance, Romanticising Culture, British Journal of Sociology of Education, 7, 1, 1986
Rob Walker, op. cit., 1986
Peter Woods, Conversations With Teachers, British Educational Research Journal, 11, 1, 1985

[7]Robert G Burgess, op. cit., 1983
Lynn Davies, Pupil Power, Falmer, Lewes, 1984
Paul Willis, Learning to Labour, Saxon House, London, 1977
Peter Woods, The Divided School, Routledge, London, 1979
Peter Woods, Coping at School Through Humour, British Educational Research Journal, 4, 2, 1983
Peter Woods, Conversations With Teachers, British Educational Research Journal, 11, 1, 1985

[8]Julia Stanley, Marks on the Memory, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1989, pps 45-63

The students had their own ways of testing out strangers. Some of the tough lads were openly rude and contemptuous for a while, probably because this was their usual response to adult overtures of friendship, and once I was forced to watch a young friend being nastily bullied, because to intervene would have meant losing all credibility as a neutral observer. Five or six of the twenty-seven students in 4T avoided talking to me at first, except when common courtesy required it , but after I had spent the best part of a term working alongside pupils, doing the same homework, taking tests and getting middling grades, nearly everyone treated me as a sort of 'auntie'. They never forgot my age, and often talked about my teenage children, but many confided in me about things which they could not discuss with parents or teachers, and several still call or write to tell me about the traumas of young adulthood.

Theory to Change the World

> *For better or for worse, the school serves those whose views dominate. And like a good shoe, Mansfield High serves mainstream Mansfield.*
>
> Alan Peshkin[9]

An ethnographer who shares ideas with her subjects lays herself open to some beneficial stress. Other peoples' attitudes and opinions can be shocking, and difficult to accept, which is a valuable warning that the host community has a different world view, a different set of cultural assumptions, to those of academia. At Cato Park, everyone became aware of some preconceptions which at first prevented their resident researcher from seeing things their way, because I found it difficult not to get drawn into arguments about three aspects of school life which most people there took for granted:

1 Most boys and men teachers (and quite a few women) thought that hitting students 'taught them a lesson', and was ultimately good for them.

2 Cato Park students generally loved wearing school uniform, and conformed unthinkingly to petty restrictions designed to 'keep pupils in their place'.

3 The teachers were good professionals, but many of them were uninterested in pastoral care of students, which they referred to dismissively as 'lion taming'.

---

[9]Alan Peshkin, op. cit., 1978

These deeply conservative attitudes were different from the values I had picked up during fifteen years teaching in urban high schools with a strong progressive ethos, but eventually 4T were able to make me understand that 'people round here are slow to change, and you'll find they need a very good reason to do things differently'.[10]

'Doing democracy' had many different meanings, and these included accepting what ordinary people valued, even when their attitudes conflicted with the wider perspective conferred by reading and experience. To reject the beliefs of mainstream Morriston would have alienated the very people I depended on to interpret fieldwork data. Moreover, if the Cato Park study was to be of any use, it had to start from an understanding of why most families went along with the status quo. In Patti Lather's rather grandiose words:-

> *Theory adequate to the task of changing the world must be open-ended, nondogmatic, informing, and grounded in the circumstances of everyday life; and, moreover, it must be premised on a deep respect for the intellectual and political capacities of the dispossessed.*[11]

The desire to be of some modest practical use was an important motive for chosing a 'democratic', or collaborative approach. In Lather's neo-Marxist newspeak, the case study aimed to be 'research as praxis', and the methodology which evolved during the data-gathering stage from 1984 to 1986 fulfilled Lather's four criteria of democratic fieldwork;

1 Interviews were relaxed and informal, and the researcher gave away information about herself.

2 There were a series of interviews - some with individuals, and some with groups - so that topics were mulled over more than once, on different occasions and in different circumstances.

3 Theories and conclusions were talked through with the subjects, and drafts of individual chapters were negotiated with the people concerned.

---

[10] Julia Stanley, op. cit. p 2

[11] Patti Lather, Research as Praxis, Harvard Educational Review, 56, 3, 1986

4 Taken for granted beliefs, including those of the researcher, were regularly challenged to see how they influenced the conduct of the fieldwork, and any eventual conclusions or recommendations.

The last of these is one of the basic strengths of participatory research; like democratic government, modern ethnography rests squarely on the informed consent of the subject. In reality, of course, 'democracy' is a very slippery customer to pin down, but for practical purposes, when people believe that they have been properly consulted they probably have, and some sort of democracy has been in action. On the other hand, genuine consultation can be undermined by hidden imponderables such as age difference, or the relative social status of collaborators, which outsiders may find difficult to balance against exaggerated claims about 'research as praxis'.

When I came to write up the Cato Park study I tried to include myself as a narrator, and to interact reflexively with the story, using Peshkin's marvellous study of Mansfield High as model.[12] I hoped to give a complete and honest account of what it felt like to do grounded research, but I also wanted 4T and their families and teachers to have ownership of it, so that they could begin to change their world if that was what they wanted. I was only partly successful in this. 4T took a continuing interest in the progress of the book for over three years after they left school, and the father who provided the title thought of convening a meeting about it 'as a basis for where do we go from here', but most people proved reluctant to offer an opinion about the finished product. It seemed that Rob Walker was right, and the conventions of academic writing effectively excluded anyone who was unfamiliar with them[13].

---

[12]Alan Peshkin, op. cit. 1978
See also Peter Woods, New Songs Played Skillfully, in Burgess, Issues in Educational Research, op. cit. 1985

[13]Rob Wlker, op. cit., 1986

Accommodating the Facts[14]

There could be another explanation for the deafening silence which greeted the eventual publication of Marks on the Memory. Inevitably, staff and students at Cato Park may not have liked some of the conclusions, particularly if they skim-read the book and took them out of context. Critics of Paul Willis's work[15] have said that it over-simplifies the richness of human nature in the interests of sociological theorizing, and by the same token, the chapter dividing 4T into 'apprentice workers', 'future spouses', and 'successful students' could be read as a crude 'taxonomy of types', insulting to the real teenagers concerned.[16]

Similarly, teachers might not have been too pleased to read that *what pupils got out of Cato Park depended on where they fitted into the school's 'class' system.....where they belonged on a spectrum of gender and ability*, and those who took offense at the notion of an 'academic class system' might be further upset to read that *achievements were only recognised in the light of one set of educational ideals....derived ultimately from .....the old public and grammar schools*[17]

The six families who collaborated in drafting some chapters were unlikely to be offended by criticisms of the organisation and ethos of Cato Park, which were based on their own cautiously worded opinions, but any who read as far as an analysis of equal opportunities at the end could have disliked the suggestion that their children were *willing victims* of *'a gigantic agency of social control'*, and some may not have agreed that Morriston adults valued *'useful knowledge', 'basic skills' and 'good presentation' more highly than 'fancy titles' or 'free expression'* .[18]

In fact, nobody can predict how qualitative material will turn out in the end, as R W Connell et al pointed out in the Australian study which greatly influenced later drafts of Marks on the Memory:

> *Wrestling with the evidence has forced us to refine, and in some cases substantially change, conceptions with which the project started.*[19]

---

[14] Julia Stanley, The Uses and Abuses of Sociology, Journal of Curriculum Studies, 19, 2, 1987

[15] J W Walker, op. cit., 1986

[16] Julia Stanley, op. cit., 1989, p 150-2

[17] ibid, p 152-3

[18] ibid, p 146

[19] R W Connell et al, Making the Difference, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1982, p 32

The Connell team began their case studies at break-neck speed, with four researchers interviewing 96 pupils, their families, and several of their teachers in the space of a year, so that it took them two and a half years to wrestle with the data, and they were *conscious of muddying the water more than clearing it .....feeding in complications at a faster rate than ideas that might sort them out.*[20] Paradoxically, it was the muddied waters in the early work which gave it a strong smell of intellectual integrity, and the authors seemed to know this, as jointly and separately they continued to filter out ideas over the next few years,[21] culminating in Connell's magisterial analysis of Gender & Power.[22]

The intellectual integrity of the Australian team shone through their research procedures. After they took preliminary drafts of Making the Difference back to the subjects, they realized *there is always something uncomfortable about teachers, or researchers for that matter, telling the masses what's wrong with them as if there were nothing wrong with us*[23], but extensive consultations helped to correct the balance of power - *because we had to explain ourselves and get other people's agreement at each major step, we were under pressure to be sensitive to their interests and concerns.*[24] Experienced ethnographers will recognise the vulnerability of the academic who tries to be democratic while working with theories developed by the patriarchs of social research.

In the year Making the Difference was published, an American Professor of Education and Sociology told a high school principal he should hire an ethnographer and *turn him or her loose in the school for several months with the aim of writing a portrait of the moral life of the community.*[25] In the event, Gerald Grant got together with a social studies teacher and an academic colleague, and began to teach urban anthropology to students at Hamilton High. It was those students' work, supplemented by endless meetings and conversations with past and present teachers at the school, which determined the method and form of a case study Grant eventually published as a result of his conversation with the principal.

---

[20]ibid, p 183

[21]R W Connell, Theorising Gender, Sociology, 19, 2, 1985
R W Connell, op. cit., 1985
S Kessler, G W Dowsett, R W Connell, D J Ashenden, Gender Relations in Secondary Schools, Sociology of Education, 58, 1, 1985

[22]R W Connell, Gender & Power, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987

[23]R W Connell et al, op. cit, 1982, p 200

[24]Ibid, p 214

[25]Gerald Grant, The World We Created at Hamilton High, Harvard University Press, 1988, p 4

Although I did not make a conscious connection at the time, I threw away the ouline for a book I had been working on for two years and started over...I turned my efforts to writing a sociologically informed history of Hamilton High.[26]

The World We Created at Hamilton High shared some characteristics with Making the Difference, which used a historical framework as a backdrop to sociological theories, but Grant's work can also be read as a postscript to Growing Up American,[27] because it dealt with the near-collapse of moral consensus in American schools.

The informed consent of both pupils and parents is a necessary precondition of good public education, as Grant was able to demonstrate, and we have seen that it is also an indispensible feature of democratic research. By using the students themselves to gather data, Grant made sure that his case study was *sensitive to their interests and concerns*. Teaching them urban anthropology was a good way of making sure that the young people were genuinely involved, and preventing their parents' views from dominating the fieldwork, as they tended to do in the Australian study and at Cato Park.[28]

Bridging the Gap

In different ways, Peshkin, Connell and Grant all used democratic interaction with subjects to bridge the gap between the conservative traditions of social science and the various 'ways of seeing' of men and women from different backgrounds. By co-operating with members of the host community, they overcame the limitations of their own gender and class, struck up a rapport with subjects, and won their trust. What is more, they were prepared to be flexible and adapt their methods to circumstances, which is one of the hallmarks of good ethnography.

---

[26]ibid, p 5
[27]Alan Peshkin, op. cit., 1978
[28]R W Connell et al, op. cit., 1982, p 214
Julia Stanley, op. cit., 1989, p 54

Democratic methods of fieldwork offer the researcher an opportunity to step inside other people's heads, and take a look out at a different 'world view', but the process is fraught with pitfalls. The best known of these is the risk of an ethnographer 'going native', or identifying too closely with subjects, which Lather suggested could be kept to a minimum by reflexivity, and wide-ranging consultation; another is coping with the sheer volume of contradictory opinion, which nearly overwhelmed the Connell team; and there is the possibility of an articulate and congenial group of subjects having too much influence on the research report during redrafting.

These are very real difficulties, which call into question the validity of all forms of interactive research. The only true defence against them lies in the personal and academic integrity of the researcher, as it is perceived by the subjects and afterwards by readers of the completed study, so why is 'doing democracy' so much the fashion among educationalists? One good reason is that collaboration with subjects reveals intimate details about how other people respond to the social environment - for example, in a lively defence of sociology, John O'Neill argued that ours is a disciplinary society, in which *power works by a sort of capillary action, drawing itself up from individual conduits.*[29]

As it happens, the Cato Park study highlighted differing attitudes to discipline, because that was one of six 'grounded topics' raised by 4T in interviews and private conversation.[30] The case studies of individual families were specifically designed to *re-examine the division between public and private conduct in terms of historically variable strategies of discipline*, because ordinary peoples' experience of education is an obvious example of *the embodiment of power as it is acheived in the lives of individuals, families, and educational insitutions.*[31]

---

[29] John O'Neill, The Disciplinary Society, British Journal of Sociology, XXXVII, 1, 1986, p 53

[30] Julia Stanley, op. cit., 1989 ps 129-33, 173-5

[31] John O'Neill, op. cit., 1986, p 57

Schools are at the heart of the disciplinary process, and are therefore of theoretical interest to disciples of Weber and Foucault, but to educational sociologists they are also microcosms and seed-beds of industrial society. It is in schools and colleges that democratic research has the most realistic prospect of being used as praxis, because it is the nature of young people to seek out theories capable of changing their world. It is therefore no coincidence that Connell's potentially revolutionary theory of 'gender regimes' grew out of collaborative research in schools,[32] and it makes sense that the vogue for small-scale studies of schools has led to a revival of interest in 'education for democracy'.[33]

Doing democracy is all about trading ideas and mutuality of interests. Behind all the idealism and sophisticated theorizing lies a straight-forward belief that academic endeavour should be of some use, to the people who make it possible, and to society as a whole, and collaborative work in schools offers an opportunity to work with parents, who ultimately control the education system provided by the state, and with students, who will wield this power in their turn. It therefore offers a unique opportunity to influence the wellbeing and attitudes of future generations of 'ordinary people'.

> *(S)chool is the obvious site for political education. It might be expected in a democracy to figure prominently..... Vigorously and intelligently to defend something, after all, **one must know and be committed to it** and be able to employ the relevant skills in its defence.*[34]

Julia Stanley
January 1990

3315 words
493 f/n
3808 total

---

[32]R W Connell, op. cit., 1987

[33]See for example:
John White, The Comprehensive Ideal, British Journal of Educational Studies, XXXV, 3, 1987
Clive Harber and Roland Meighan (eds), The Democratic School, Education Now, Ticknall, U K, 1989

[34]ibid, Patricia White, Educating Courageous Citizens, p 13